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ABSTRACT

Classroom teaching methods and activities designed to encourage collaborative communication between teacher and students and among students in the English-as-a-second-language (ESL), bilingual, or mainstream class containing English language learners (ELLs) are presented. The approach is intended to reduce the teacher-controlled nature of interactions and promote active language use. Two verbal-interactive academic activities found to be especially effective in developing an environment for collaborative talk are described. The first is the use of classroom interaction methods involving ELL students in interaction not just as respondents but as active participants in the negotiation of meaning. Several ways of organizing verbal interaction are discussed and compared. The second method is the use of storytelling activities in which ELLs can take advantage of their own experiences and cultural traditions to develop "oracy" and literacy concepts and skills across the curriculum. Techniques the teacher can use to support ELLs' oral language development and link storytelling with other skill areas are offered. Contains 31 references and a list of 47 instructional resources for teachers. (MSE)

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CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR ENCOURAGING COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION

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by Carmen Simich-Dudgeon
Patricia Anne DiCerbo, Editor

Preface

This article is written primarily for English as a second language (ESL), bilingual and mainstream teachers who have English language learners in their classroom. The methods and activities described throughout can be successfully adapted for use with elementary, middle, and high school students. In reworking these activities for their own classrooms, teachers will want to consider the literacy and English proficiency levels of their students, along with such factors as age, cultural and education background, and learning style.

The Need for Collaborative Talk in the Classroom

In the last twenty-five years or so, research has provided significant evidence that collaborative academic talk is at the heart of the learning experience (Barnes, 1976; Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Hudelson, 1994; McCreedy & Simich-Dudgeon, 1990; McKeon, 1994; Philips, 1972; Simich, 1984; Wells, 1985; Wilkinson, 1965; among others). Research suggests, in fact, that "talk is a major means by which learners explore the relationship between what they already know and new observations or interpretations which they meet" (Barnes, 1976, in Cullinan, 1993, p. 2) and that "the practice of hurrying children away from talk and into work with paper and pencil — of discounting their oracy[1] — has grave effects on their literacy" (Gillard, 1996, p. xiii). Moreover, verbal interaction with peers helps students to clarify their thinking and "introduces them to new perspectives [that] . . . facilitate reflection and innovative thinking" (Wollman-Bonilla, 1993, p.49). There is also evidence that collaborative discussions about texts provides students with a way to improve their reading comprehension and develop a positive attitude towards reading (Cambourne, 1988; Gillard, 1996; among others). In addition, by listening to students interact with one another, teachers learn a great deal about their perspectives on the themes and topic at hand and can use this information to plan for learner-centered curricula and instruction.

Despite the apparent benefits, though, most classroom verbal interaction is teacher-controlled rather than collaborative (Edwards & Furlong, 1987; Edwards & Westgate, 1994; McCreedy & Simich-

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Dudgeon, 1990; Simich, 1984; among others). Teachers do most of the talking, select most — if not all — of the topics for discussion, make decisions about who will participate through strategic use of turn-allocation procedures, and determine the relevance and correctness of students' responses to their inquiries (Edwards & Westgate, 1994).

There are several reasons why teachers may not consider student verbal interaction as central to the teaching and learning process (Cullinan, 1993). First of all, the role of classroom talk in the learning process, and particularly in the development of literacy skills, has remained largely unknown to most classroom teachers. Secondly, teachers may be influenced by their own experiences as learners in classrooms where talk was discredited as not being conducive to thinking and learning, or was seen as a discipline problem. Cullinan (1993) observes that "[T]raditionally, we have valued silent classrooms because we tend to equate silence with thinking and with productive work" (p.2).

Collaborative Talk and the English Language Learner

The consequences of a silent classroom are particularly discernible for the language minority English language learner (ELL). Students who are in the process of learning English need help developing their oracy skills as a foundation for becoming literate (Cullinan, 1993; Heller, 1995; Hudelson, 1994; Philips, 1972; Wollman-Bonilla, 1993). They need an environment where they can talk not only with their teacher, but also with their peers. It is important, then, to impress on ESL, bilingual and monolingual teachers who have ELLs in their classrooms the benefits of giving their students opportunities to use verbal language for different purposes and situations.

In this paper, two verbal-interactive academic activities are described that have been found to be especially effective in developing an environment for collaborative talk. The first is the use of classroom interaction methods that involve ELL students in the interaction, not just as respondents, but as active participants in the negotiation of meaning (Edward & Westgate, 1994; Simich, 1984; Simich-Dudgeon, McCreedy & Schleppegrell, 1989; Simich-Dudgeon, McCreedy, & Schleppegrell, 1992; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991; among others). A second strategy is the use of storytelling activities where ELLs can take advantage of their previous background experiences and cultural traditions to develop oracy and literacy concepts and skills across the curriculum (Gillard, 1996; Meyer, 1996).

Patterns of Organizing Classroom Interaction

Teacher dominance of classroom verbal interaction is most apparent in the types of questions they ask, the types of answers they accept, and the general direction that their inquiries take (McCreedy & Simich-Dudgeon, 1990; Schleppegrell & Simich-Dudgeon, 1996; Simich, 1984). Empirical evidence indicates that there are at least three distinct patterns of organizing interaction during question-answer activities: Question-Response-Evaluation, Question-Response-Feedback, and Student-Organized Interaction (Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Mehan, 1979; Simich, 1984; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991; among others).

Question-Response-Evaluation

The typical pattern in most classrooms is for the teacher to initiate a question and then sanction or evaluate the student's response. This questioning style is characterized by teachers choosing the topics for discussion, the kinds of question to be asked, who may participate in the interaction, and whether to accept or reject the proffered response. In many cases, students are not given feedback, or the opportunity to reflect on their responses. The following dialogue is an example of this type of interaction:

- **Teacher**:Matthew, what do you think hedges are useful for?

Matthew: Corn. (*quietly*)
Teacher: Can't hear you, Matthew.
Matthew: Corn.
Teacher: Hedges are useful for corn? No. Karen?
Karen: So the things can't get out.
Teacher: So the things can't get out. (*Three second pause*) Stop the animals getting into cornfield to eat all the corn wouldn't it?

- (From MacLure & French, 1980, as cited in Edward & Westgate, 1994, p.127.)

Question-Response-Feedback

A second pattern of organizing verbal interaction is characterized by the teacher-initiated question, the student's response, followed by teacher-facilitated negotiation of meaning, or *feedback* (Simich, 1984; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Teacher feedback in the form of paraphrasing students' responses allows students, particularly ELLs, the opportunity to co-construct a response with their teacher and their peers (Simich-Dudgeon, McCreedy, & Schleppegrell, 1988). In the verbal interactive segment below, the teacher uses a question-response-feedback style while involving several students in the interaction. The negotiation of meaning leads to a collaborative response with several students (Simich, 1984)[2]:

- **Teacher**: What do you know about it so far?
  Student: You can have a skin on top of the water.
  Teacher: A kind of skin on top of the water, but remember it's not a skin like the skin on boiled milk, you can't scrape it up and take it off and leave it on the side of your plate — you can't do that with it. But it is a kind of skin and various insects can make use of it. Think of one insect that makes use of the skin — Michael?
  Michael: Mosquito
  Teacher: Good, a mosquito. How does a mosquito use this skin? Janet?
  Janet: It lays its larva underneath it.
  Teacher: Well, yes, the eggs are laid in water and then what happens to the larva? What does the larva do? Well?
  Student: Hangs from the surface tension on top of the water.
  Teacher: Good, it hangs from the surface on the water. Why? Why can't it lie under the water altogether/ Why does it need to hang from the surface?
  Student: It would not be able to breathe.
  Teacher: Yes, it wouldn't be able to breathe. What it does is to put a breath ing tube up into the air and breathes that way …

  (Taken from a lesson on surface tension recorded in a middle school, Chilver & Gould, 1982, as cited in Edwards & Westgate, 1994, pp. 48-49.)

Student-Organized Interaction

The third way to organize verbal interaction is characterized by students having control of the interaction, with the teacher taking the double role of participant and facilitator as needed. The research suggests that this organizational pattern is not very common in classroom settings (Edwards & Westgate, 1994). Within this context, teachers relinquish their expert roles and allow students to freely initiate and answer questions that are important to them, and to lead the discussion in the direction that they want it to go. In the excerpt below, Gail, the teacher, and a group of her 5th and 6th grade students are in a literature study circle activity discussing their reactions about a book they have just read. Notice how the students freely ask questions. Also note the infrequent number of the

teacher's turns at talk.

- **Gail**: Can I talk?
  Angelina: Go ahead.
  Students: Yeah. (laughter)
  Sylvia: Yes, go ahead!
  Gail: No, I love this book too and, um…
  Angelina (*interrupting*): I wanna buy it.
  Jarvis: It was the best books since (*inaudible*)
  Sylvia (*interrupting*): Where'd you buy this book, anyway?
  Angelina: Yeah, where can we buy it?
  Rosa: Yeah, where can we buy it, Ms. Whang, 'cause I really want to buy it.
  Angelina: I really want to buy it and keep it.
  Gail: Really? (*Students respond affirmatively with "uums."*) Uh-huh. Why do you? Why?
  Angelina: I just love it! (*Students all talk together, agreeing with Angelina. The discussion goes on.*)

  (Samway & Whang, 1996, pp.8-9).

Which Pattern of Classroom Interaction is Best for ELLs?

Student-Organized face-to-face discussion and Question-Response-Feedback are the most beneficial verbal interactions for ELL students because they provide a classroom environment that is supportive of their emergent language and cultural competence. However, although both patterns of verbal interaction encourage ELLs participation in the interaction, teachers need to consider the student's level of English proficiency and the type of questions that work best with these students.

Student-Organized Interaction is beneficial for ELLs of all levels. It provides them with a fairly unstructured, but encouraging environment where the teacher and native English-speaking peers can model grammatical and vocabulary items, and the rhetorical styles of verbal interaction. When non-English speaking, beginner and advanced ELLs participate in student-centered interaction, they have the opportunity to improve their listening comprehension and learn how to express a wide range of language functions, such as: asking questions, requesting clarification, explaining their meanings, and making predictions.

Non-English speakers and beginner ELLs will also benefit from a teacher-structured, yet supportive, Question-Response-Feedback pattern that focuses on previously-taught concepts, skills, and vocabulary. In addition, to encourage these students' participation, teachers can allow them to use their growing communicative repertoire by responding non-verbally, e.g., pointing to a location on a map, adding a feature to a diagram, or demonstrating a calculation at the chalkboard. These authentic non-verbal representations can then be used by the teacher to co-construct a response with the students. Also at this level, it is not necessary — or effective — to focus on the form when the topic of the interaction is subject matter such as math or science.[3] In the words of one minority, native English speaking 6th grader,

- [My friend] knows what [the answer is] but he can't actually say it out, and sometimes that happens with people who do know English, you know. It's just that you can't phrase it right (Simich-Dudgeon, McCreedy, & Schleppegrell, 1988, p.13).[4]

Giving students a chance to "phrase it right" is a pivotal aspect of the collaborative classroom.

Research indicates that waiting at least three seconds after you ask a question, and before you respond to a student's answer, will lead to a higher-quality response. As an experienced 6th grade teacher confided, "sometimes when you allow students the time to explain [their] thinking you can unscramble [their] confusion and get an effective response" (Simich-Dudgeon, McCreedy, & Schleppegrell, 1988).

Aside from modifying their own habits of questioning and eliciting discussion, teachers of ELLs also need to consider that their students may follow different norms for appropriate classroom interaction. Eye contact and body orientation, for example, are important attention behaviors in American classrooms and exhibiting such behaviors, e.g., student sits up straight and looks at the teacher, is equated with learning (Schleppegrell & Simich-Dudgeon, 1996). Teachers may want to explicitly teach ELLs the attention behaviors that are valued in their classroom, together with other sociocultural and cognitive behaviors that ELLs need to succeed in school. However, these new understandings should be *added* to the rich language and cultural knowledge these students bring with them, not used to replace them.

What Types of Questions are Best for ELLs?

In addition to the questioning styles described above, a number of classifications have been developed to categorize teachers' questions according to the cognitive demand of those questions (Gall, 1984; Mehan, 1979; among others). Most classifications can be said to differentiate between *fact* or *factual-recall* questions and *higher cognitive* questions. Gall (1984, p.40) summarizes the difference by stating that "fact questions require students to recall previously presented information, whereas higher cognitive questions require students to engage in independent thinking.[5]

Research suggests that a combination of factual-recall questions and higher cognitive questions is beneficial to students because each type of question has different instructional functions. For example, Gall (1984) suggests that factual-recall questions are appropriate when promoting the learning of concepts and skills where memorization is essential, e.g., the multiplication or periodic tables. Higher cognitive questions, on the other hand, are those that require students to apply the facts, generalize from the facts, or explain certain principles behind the facts — by asking students to predict, justify, explain, reflect, and interpret. Since learning involves organizing information and linking it with what is already known, combining factual-recall and higher cognitive questions is one way to make sure that students are making connections rather than simply memorizing an unorganized collection of details.[6]

Teachers are at times reluctant to ask higher cognitive questions of ELLs for fear of 'putting them on the spot.' There is evidence, though, that ELLs will do as well with higher cognitive questions as with fact questions (Shuqiang, 1987).[7] However, ELLs may need additional help — or simply more time — to respond to higher cognitive questions. Teachers can assign higher cognitive questions for homework or small group work. This should ease somewhat the linguistic demand of expressing complex thought in a second language, since students can use a dictionary to clarify unfamiliar vocabulary, develop their responses in whichever language they can best express them, and then formulate their responses appropriately.

Collaborative Talk Through Storytelling

Anecdotal and research evidence suggest that storytelling provides a dynamic context for learning, and that storytelling is an exciting and powerful tool for self-expression (Gillard, 1996). Using storytelling in the classroom is a versatile means of developing verbal-interactive skills, as well as other language skills such as listening, reading, and writing (Barton, as cited in Cullinan, 1993). Barton describes

storytelling as a unique performance where,

- ... the teller must slow time in order to see the story in his or her mind, relate to the characters and their dilemmas, consider personal feelings and responses to capture the truth of the moment, understand the story's significant turning points and have a sense of how to highlight them, and then put this into action while gauging the responses of the listeners in order to mold the flow of the story as it is constructed in the theater of their minds. It is very much improvisational in nature, like participating in a conversation. There is also a powerful sense of intimacy (pp.17-18).[8]

He argues that storytelling is natural for most, if not all, of us because we have been exposed to it as listeners and storytellers ourselves, from childhood to adulthood. Storytelling, he continues, is beneficial for students *and* teachers. Yet "few teachers of language actually write...or even consciously talk . . . creatively in the way they expect their students to do. Thus we neither develop our own language as we could nor surprise ourselves by our own skills in manipulating words to creative ends" (Cullinan, 1993, p.18).

Teachers who do not know how to make storytelling an integral component of their own lives may not understand its value for their students. As Gillard (1996) comments, "[teachers] are still a long way from honoring our students' unique stories and devising curriculum that stretches their knowledge, encourages their questions, and engages their imaginations" (p.xiv). Gillard, a professional storyteller, has found that teachers tend to view storytelling as a radical idea. She recalls how many teachers react with surprise when told about using storytelling as part of the curriculum. For example, one teacher exclaimed, "Let [the students] tell their stories? They won't ever stop!" (Ibid, p.xiii). Another teacher stated adamantly, "There is too much curriculum already. There's no time for storytelling" (Ibid, p.xiii).

Using Storytelling to Develop Oral Language

Making time for personal storytelling is a good way to introduce ELLs — and all other students — to this oral tradition genre as an authentic context for learning language across the curriculum. Teachers can initiate personal storytelling by modeling their own stories, and the specific strategies they use to communicate meaning. Going through the steps of brainstorming ideas, for example, helps focus students on their own creative processes. Using visual organizers like webbing, or time lines is also recommended because it improves students' abilities to comprehend and synthesize information. Moreover, when teachers share their personal histories, dreams, celebrations and losses with their students, it supports a classroom environment where students feel comfortable talking about their lives and what matters to them.

In developing their own stories, ELL students can be encouraged to talk to their parents, guardians, grandparents, and other family members and together recall stories from the near past, or stories that were passed on to them by previous generations. Students can start with self-stories about how they got their names, how their parents (or grandparents) met, and other stories of family, friends and community (Cullinan, 1993). Teachers can also invite students to reflect on their own language learning by asking if they know how old they were when they said their first words, what language they used, what they said.

It is important to include even non-English speakers in storytelling activities, rather than relegate them to the back seats as non-participants. Students who are at the very beginning stage of learning English can get help from their families in putting together stories that are meaningful to them. They can then

use their native language to describe their country of origin and journey to the United States, or to share some special artifact or craft from their native culture. Instead of using English to tell stories about their lives, these students can describe their lives with illustrations, drawings, and pictures, and dramatize their lives through the use of native costumes, music, body movement, contrasting prosody, and other clues.

Barton (as cited in Cullinan, 1993) points out that "it is in recalling past events that our students come to terms with their own identities, and, in the process, gain a sense of significance and self-respect" (p.26). Telling personal stories allows ELLs the opportunity to proudly share their home culture and memories with their English-learning and English-speaking classmates, and to involve their families in their education in a profound way. Research suggests that non-English speaking parents want their children to succeed in school, but are often unable to help them because they do not speak English well and are not familiar with the American school system. Involvement in storytelling activities can increase these parents' self-confidence and sense of acceptance in the same way that it improves the self-respect of their children. At the same time, storytelling encourages monolingual English students who participate to develop a more positive view of their English-learning peers and to learn from their stories and language. The experience of actively observing and listening to their classmates' stories demonstrates that meaning is conveyed not only through words, but also through actions, not only through one, but also through different languages.

As with other classroom verbal activities, when using storytelling activities with ELLs, teachers need to be aware of cross-cultural differences in students' speech patterns reflected in the organization of ideas, such as differences in the rhetorical organization of narratives. For example, research with young children suggests that they use at least two distinct styles to organize stories: *topic-centered* and *topic-associating* (Michaels, 1986). The topic centered-style is characterized by distinct shifts in reference and a high degree of cohesion. Topic-associating styles make use of parallelisms, analogy, and associations between what may appear to the teacher to be unrelated characters and ideas. Although research suggests that most American teachers expect a topic-centered rhetorical style from students, ELL children and youth may come from cultures where the topic-associating style is preferred. In fact, the topic-associating style may be the only narrative style that they know. Teachers of ELLs may want to model topic-centered ways of narrating their stories, thus enlarging these students' communicative repertoires.

Linking Storytelling with Reading, Writing and Other Skills

Storytelling activities can be followed by activities explicitly designed to connect discussion with reading and writing, such as the Language Experience Approach (LEA), or Writer Workshop strategies, depending on the students' level of English language proficiency. Beginner ELLs can benefit from the LEA where students tell their story to the teacher who can then help develop it into a written work that can be read by the whole class. For students with higher levels of English proficiency, the teacher can model the Writer Workshop process, which stresses collaborative writing over time (Hudelson, 1994). With teacher modeling and support,

- children are able to (a) create stories based on events in their lives; (2) work over a period of time to draft stories; (3) in small and large group conferences read what they are writing for the purpose of eliciting other children's and adult's questions, comments, and suggestions; (4) make substantive changes in their pieces based on the comments of other and their own ideas; and (5) with the assistance of a teacher make editing changes to the final version of the narrative. In order for this to occur, the teacher works directly with individuals and small groups as well as circulating among the learners (Hudelson, 1994, p.142).

One of the workshop strategies is to form small groups of students that include both native English speakers and ELLs at different levels of English proficiency and ask them to create a cooperative story. The story may be drawn from imagined or real-life events, or based on a story read in class. The teacher can then encourage students to tell or dramatize their group story for the class, and follow up with additional workshop activities (Hudelson, 1994).

Intermediate or advanced level ELL students can also participate in Literature Circles or student-organized discussions of texts they read outside of class (Samway & Whang, 1996). Folktales from around the world are a wonderful source of reading for these collaborative groups since they allow students to share their cultural point of view about the characters, actions, and events of the story. Poems and nursery rhymes are another good basis for exploring different perspectives, and negotiating meaning. In addition, such works can serve as a starting point for collaborative writing. Bauer (1986), for instance, suggests telling folktales to get students involved in understanding a story, and predicting or choosing how it will end. Similar to the workshop strategy described above, ELLs and English speakers can work together to write and illustrate their version of the story's ending.

Many folktales, poems and rhymes encourage students to chant, sing, create special effects, or react in some way. Jacob's poem, "The Strange Visitor" (Jacob, 1967, as cited in Cullinan, 1993, pp. 19-20) is an example of this type of interactive activity where students engage in choral response.

- A woman was sitting at her reel one night
  And still she sat, and still she reeled,
  and still she wished for company
  In came a pair of broad broad soles, and sat down at the fireside
  And still she sat, and still she reeled,
  and still she wished for company.
  In came a pair of small small legs, and sat down on the broad broad soles
  And still she sat, and still she reeled, a
  nd still she wished for company...[9]

Students involved in an interactive storytelling session may be asked to listen carefully to the words of the story, join in on the refrain, and share their interpretation of the story's meaning (Cullinan, 1993). Follow-up activities may include a Literature Circle activity where students select their own text, or a Writer Workshop activity where they compose their own work over time. By taking part in these interactive storytelling activities, ELLs at different levels of English proficiency have the opportunity to develop their listening comprehension and sound discrimination, along with their creative writing and reading skills.

For teachers who want to learn more about the practice of storytelling, there are several useful resources, such as, *Joining in: An anthology of audience participation stories and how to tell them*, compiled by Teresa Miller (1988). In this book, eighteen storytellers discuss techniques and strategies for encouraging listeners to help them in the telling of a story (Cullinan, 1993). Other sources of storytelling material are listed in the bibliography section at the end of this document.

Final Note

Student-organized discussion, non-evaluative feedback, and shared storytelling contribute to an environment where the ELL student learns how to use language to interact with others, and to produce and interpret a variety of language functions. By engaging in collaborative talk with their peers and

teachers, students can develop their own English language proficiency, and use their emergent knowledge across the curriculum.

The importance of collaborative academic talk, though, goes beyond language development and the learning of concepts and skills that are transferable to other school subjects. Personal storytelling and sharing gives students the opportunity to "reflect on their own and their peers' lives and to better understand their hopes, fears, conflicts, and predicaments" (Cullinan, 1993, p.26). When we integrate all students into the academic life of the classroom, we allow them to demonstrate their unique qualities and, at the same time, to develop a classroom community that transcends cultural and language differences.

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Resources for Teachers

1. Storytelling Activities

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Endnotes

1. Andrew Wilkinson (1965), the British researcher and educator, coined the term 'oracy' to describe the cognitive and social ability and skills inherent in cademic speaking and listening. He proposed oracy as a term analogous with literacy (Cullinan, 1993).

2. When using this strategy, teachers guide one or more students to come up with an appropriate response. Simich (1984) found that the collaborative co-construction of responses had strong instructional benefits to all students, including ELLs.

3. Teachers should use the "mistakes" made by ELLs when trying to convey their meanings for at least two purposes: to identify specific vocabulary and grammar that needs to be taught (Omaggio, 1993; Shrum & Glisan, 1994); and to determine the interlanguage level of their students (Selinker, 1974). In addition, I take the position that students' errors during verbal interaction present teachers with opportunities to model the appropriate structure to students and allows teachers to plan for vocabulary and/or grammar instruction that is communicative and contextualized.

4. The research suggests that teachers evaluate students' responses partially on the basis of their social interaction skills, e.g., exhibits a confident tone of voice, does not hesitate before answering (Schleppegrell & Simich-Dudgeon, 1996). However, classroom social interactive conventions vary according to several factors, including culture. ELLs often need time to learn the appropriate interactive behaviors for answering teachers' questions.

5. Factual questions are those that involve students in mentally reproducing facts, formulas, or other

information through recognition, rote memory, and selective recall. With higher cognitive questions, students analyze and integrate given subject matter, or they generate independently their own information, or take a new direction on a given topic.

6. Factual-recall questions have a legitimate pedagogical function during all lesson activities; however, research suggests that they are over-represented during question-response activities.

7. Although Shuqiang's research dealt with written answers, it does apply to verbal interaction since written work is frequently used as a starting point for questioning activities.

8. Storytelling is different from reading a story aloud in that the latter "might be better described as enacting a text in which a third party, the author, demands attention of both reader and listeners" (Barton, as cited in Cullinan, p.18).

9. The full text of Jacob's poem appears in *English fairy tales.* (1967). NY: Dover Publications, Inc.

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